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Introduction to the Road Film

Midterm Exam

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1.

One of the main films that focused its themes on rebellious critique and conservative authority was *Bonnie and Clyde*. The film was less about historical accuracy and more a direct reflection of the late 1960's ideology with the rise of the Vietnam War, the assassination of President Kennedy and the horrific Charles Manson murders. In David Laderman's essay he explains how the cultural roots of the road film seemed to step from three different genres which are the western, the gangster and the film noir which also are very similar to Jack Kerouac's 1955 novel *On the Road*. "All three of these genres predated *On the Road*, and Sal and Dean Affectionately invoke western and gangster films throughout. *On the Road*'s basic themes and style also highlight the ideological contradiction between rebellion and tradition." (3)

Right in the opening shot of *Bonnie and Clyde* you can see a close-up of Bonnie Parker become bored and restless on her bed, wanting to escape the imprisonment of traditional lifestyle. When she catches Clyde trying to break into her mother's car, his dangerous character fascinates her and gives her an emotional sensual excitement of rebellion and risk that she never felt before. Clyde talks Bonnie into leaving with him not just because of the liberating crime life he is offering her but because he seems to be insightful in who she is as a person and what her

needs and desires are. There are several specific goals that *Bonnie and Clyde* are trying to achieve when on the road which usually ranges between money and fame. Even though they seem to enjoy robbing banks they get more of an excitement out of the fame that they are creating within the eyes of the media. In one specific scene *Bonnie and Clyde* catch a Texas Ranger trying to arrest them because of the reward money. Instead of killing him Bonnie comes up with the idea of humiliating the Ranger and getting her picture taken with him so the pictures will reach the papers. Throughout the film Clyde can never seem to sexually perform when alone with Bonnie until he reads an insightful poem about the two of them that was printed in the paper. Bonnie finally seemed to accomplish what the two of them set out to do which was make a name for themselves within the public eye which seems to please Clyde and give the two a cowboy like myth for the media. “Bonnie’s sensuality eventually becomes visionary, suggesting through her characterization an almost Blakean link between eros and insight. In writing poems about their adventures, she, not Clyde, becomes the public voice of their exploits. Moreover, the publication of her mythologizing poem is what finally triggers Clyde’s dormant sexuality.” (7)

Another goal that *Bonnie and Clyde* seemed to want to achieve is their respect and sympathy with the average working person. In David Laderman’s readings he explains how *Bonnie and Clyde* seemed to feel with the struggling everyday working man against the capitalist businesses. “Another way in which *Bonnie and Clyde* associates driving with liberation is by developing sympathy with the average working person, over and against conservative authority figures (the banks, the police, and so forth.” (6) When *Bonnie and Clyde* witness a poor family now homeless because the bank had for closed on their home the two criminals sympathize with them. In a later scene when *Bonnie and Clyde* are seriously injured the two of them are taken care of and fed by several homeless families who seem to sympathize with the criminals.

In the tradition with *On the Road* the association of liberation that *Bonnie and Clyde* feel when they are both free and on the road is heard with upbeat banjo music which symbolizes their freedom and recklessness. And similarly like the characters in *Easy Rider* the two lovers don't really find what they originally went out on the road to discover and the original excitement that Bonnie felt in the beginning starts to become regret. "We used to be goin' somewhere, now it seems like we're just goin'," Bonnie says to Clyde. The gruesome and shocking ending in *Bonnie and Clyde* sets the tone for the ideological tension between rebellion and tradition. "*Bonnie and Clyde* strongly suggests that the alternative is doomed to defeat by the fascistic trappings of a conservative society." (7) The infamous fate of these two lovers at the end of the film shows the different contrasts between their rebellious world that they been living and the harsh trappings of conservative society that finally put a stop to their reckless lifestyle.

2.

There were several films that we viewed in which past events seemed to come back and haunt the characters within the story. Two of the films I want to focus on are *Planes, Trains and Automobiles* and *Bonnie and Clyde*. The character of Del in *Planes, Trains and Automobiles* has now been a widow for several years and yet still keeps a framed portrait of his wife along with him on his travels and even seems to refer to her as if she is still alive at home waiting for him. Besides a few small clues, we like Neil don't even learn that Del's wife is dead until later on in the story in which at that time we feel sadness and pity for his character. In *Bonnie and Clyde* the character of Bonnie suddenly has a desperate need to return back home, settle down and start a family. As different as Del and Bonnie are as characters their motivations on using the road as an

attempt to escape from their past are very similar. Where Del seems to use the road to conduct his salesman business he also uses it to dismiss the painful memories of the death of his wife. Bonnie uses the road to break free from her bondage from conservative society but because the road doesn't seem to fulfill what truly makes her happy she eventually wants to return home.

Because of Bonnie's need for domestic life it creates tension between her relationship with Clyde, especially when she realizes the truth from her mother that she no longer can come home and that the only family she now has is Clyde and the Barrow gang. "This ephemeral sense of regret may be a resurgence of what she had been taught as a young girl: to settle down and start a family." (7) The main difference between the characters of Del and Bonnie is that the envy they have for the passenger on the road is for completely opposite reasons. Del seems to envy Neil because Neil seems to embrace stability having a picture perfect home and family that Del could have had with his wife; and at one moment in the film Del even says to Neil, "your one lucky guy Neil." When Bonnie meets Clyde for the first time she seems to instead envy Clyde's instability especially when Clyde mentions to her he was once locked up for armed robbery. And yet those are probably the only similarities between Bonnie and Del because both of their stories are completely different genres, and were released in completely different decades reflecting completely different times in American culture.

Where *Bonnie and Clyde*'s story is all about rebellion and anti-authority in the late 60's, *Planes Trains and Automobiles* is an odd-couple comedy of the 80s. During the time *Planes Trains and Automobiles* was released America had finally ended their war with Vietnam, Richard Nixon resigned from office, and the downbeat themes of outsiders rebelling against conservative authority were no longer valid for the stories of the road picture. Bonnie and Del's desire for family life and home also end up completely different for the two of them. Whereas

Bonnie never gets the home and family that she desires and instead gets killed in a bloody gruesome death; Del's desire for a home somewhat comes true.

What makes the character of Neil from *Planes, Trains and Automobiles* much more different than most of the characters in the films we've been watching is that Neil does not want to be on the road at all. The themes of home and family is a large part of Neil's life and his main goal for him is to get off the road and return to his family for Thanksgiving as soon as possible. But instead he is stuck on the road with Del through unfortunate circumstances and because of that it creates a comedic tension between the two of them for the story. Neil and Del are two completely opposite characters that fate brings together and the domestic differences in both of their different lifestyles creates restlessness and frustration between the two of them as they have to endure each other's different personality's traits and bad habits. Eventually Neil learns to overcome his snobbiness and accept Del for who he is when he invites Neil to his home to meet his family for Thanksgiving dinner which now gives Del a new home to come home to; for some time anyway.

4.

In the early 70's, road films that once showed the tension between the rebellion and conservative society seemed to shift and the themes became more about loneliness and psychology than social acceptance. "These lonely protagonists drive around and around, no place to go and no place to leave behind, their lackluster wanderlust driven by emotional and psychical scars." (127) Many of the scenes in the film *Two-Lane Blacktop* have hardly any dialogue and when it does occur it seems to be relating to the vehicles and what the cars themselves need with

the drivers treating them like people. *Two-Lane Blacktop* is a film in which the role of the vehicle is the real character of the story and not the person driving it. The communication from the drivers is very limited and the film instead focuses on the different sounds of the cars on its motor and engines. The characters in the film remain nameless which is probably why the director chose to call them: The Driver, GTO, The Girl and The Mechanic. “Communication with the film, all permeated by an emphasis on cars-whether as subject matter, stylistic strategy, or actual vehicle of communication.” (132)

Where the vehicles in *Two-Lane Blacktop* symbolize the characteristics of the vehicles in the film it also focuses on the alienation of communication between people in a modernist society. Each vehicle reflects the ideals of the driver especially the character of GTO. Unlike the characters of The Driver, The Girl and The Mechanic, GTO is the only character who brings life and flesh and blood to his character as he portrays a man who is going through a mid-life crises and seems to be the only one who is truly lost on the road. “In contrast to the film’s primary rock star cool, Oates creates GTO as a swaggering if quirky redneck, a man out of time.” (132) In *Easy Rider* the roles of the motorcycles that Captain America and Billy ride seem to symbolize freedom and rebellion. And yet when the two of them get brutally murdered the shot of the exploding gas tank on one of the motorcycles seems to symbolize the death of not only them but of their motorcycles as well. “This exploding gas tank not only symbolizes a certain nemesis, since the rebels money is stashed there; it also dramatizes how Captain America has ‘become’ his bike, since we never see his body dying, only his bike.” (9)

Like the readings of Jack Kerouac’s 1955 novel *On the Road*, the two genres that *Two-Lane Blacktop* and *Easy Rider* seem to invoke are the western and noir films. In *Easy Rider* Captain America and Billy recall the beautiful imagery of the west as they travel across country

in which their motorcycle can get substituted for the horse. “Road movies project Western mythology onto the landscape traversed and bound by the nation’s highways.” (33) There is one clear homage to the western early in the film which shows Captain America and Billy fixing a flat tire on one of their motorcycles and in the foreground you can see a farmer putting the ring hoofs on one of his horses. “The film vividly captures how the genre repeatedly does not oppose so much as bring together the modernity of transportation on the twentieth-century road and the traditions still historically present in the settings that the road crosses.” (34) Even the campfire scenes of the character’s sleeping out in the woods and of the beating and death of George Hanson recall themes from the western of innocent villagers being attacked by violent Indians.

Unlike the two protagonists in *Easy Rider*, the men in *Two-Lane Blacktop* decide to allow a woman to join them on their travels. Like the 40s noirs of the femme fatale The Girl’s presence in the story seems to be too much for the men to handle and she is able to cause destruction to all the characters and to their journey as well. “*Two-Lane Blacktop* configures this female threat not as a domestic lure from the road, but as a mobile loner whose wander-lust proves to be too much for the car-obsessed males.” (133) In the climax of the film The Driver seems to burn up and be destroyed ignoring his early warnings that The Girl would burn him. In the end the men once again go back on the road and the vehicles they drive once again take over their lack of character and become what they represent which is their vehicles and nothing else.

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